

## Ethnographic Landscapes

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The term “landscape” has a wide range of meaning in natural, cultural, and social research, from “a picture of natural inland scenery” to “a composition of man-made or man-modified spaces to serve as infrastructure or background for our collective existence.” If we want to discover the meaning of landscapes for people, it is best to think of them not as collections of material objects placed in geographical space, but as social and cultural constructions of the people who use them. In this sense, landscapes are “symbolic environments” that people create to give meaning and definition to their physical environment.<sup>1</sup> Cultural groups socially construct landscapes as reflections of themselves. In the process, the social, cultural, and natural environments are meshed and become part of the shared symbols and beliefs of members of the groups. Thus, natural environments and changes in them take on different meaning depending on the social and cultural symbols associated with them.

Geographically-defined space that has cultural or social meaning has been variously called “cultural landscapes,” “sacred geography,” “traditional cultural properties,” “heritage areas,” “places,” and other terms. All of these terms encompass “ethnographic landscapes”—areas of geographic space that have been given special and specific cultural or social meaning by people associated with them.

### ***Cultural Landscapes and Ethnographic Landscapes***

Outside of the National Park Service (NPS), writers and researchers think of these different kinds of landscapes as being “cultural landscapes” of one kind or another. Within the NPS, however, we recognize two different categories of socially and culturally meaningful landscapes: for one we use the term “cultural landscape”; for the other we use the term “ethnographic landscape.”

Cultural landscapes within the NPS are defined as a category of cultural resource that can be determined eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Ethnographic landscapes within the NPS context are broader, do not depend on NRHP eligibility

criteria for their existence, and importantly, are identified and defined by the cultural groups associated with them rather than by historic preservation professionals.

We emphasize this distinction because the NPS, as the nation’s lead agency for defining cultural resources preservation standards and policies, has a great deal of influence on the development of the cultural landscapes concept, and its application to land management practices. In this role, the NPS uses the nation’s central piece of cultural resources legislation, the National Historic Preservation Act. A primary component of the act is that those cultural resources that are preservation worthy (at the national, state, or local levels) must meet certain criteria that make them eligible for inclusion on the NRHP. As a fairly new category of cultural resource recognized by the NPS for their significance and preservation worthiness, cultural landscapes are also defined on the basis of their ability to meet the criteria for National Register eligibility.

The NPS cultural landscape program recognizes four overlapping categories of cultural landscapes (historic site, historic designed, historic vernacular, and ethnographic) and more specifically defined the concept as “geographic area[s], including both natural and cultural resources, associated with a historic event, activity or person.” Because their significance is based on eligibility for inclusion on the NRHP, cultural landscapes in the NPS are defined in terms of the broad patterns of the nation’s history and its local manifestations. The cultural landscape research methodology used by the NPS then focuses primarily on historical documentation, including oral histories, but identification of a cultural landscape and determination of its significance at the national, state, or local level relies on the expertise of the cultural landscape professional.

While ethnographic landscapes are recognized as a category of cultural landscapes, for purposes of the servicewide Ethnographic Resources Inventory database, the Applied Ethnography Program has specifically defined “ethnographic landscape” to be:

...a relatively contiguous area of interrelated places that contemporary cultural groups define as meaningful because it is inextricably and traditionally linked to their own local or regional histories, cultural identities, beliefs and behaviors. Present-day social factors such as a people's class, ethnicity, and gender may result in the assignment of diverse meanings to a landscape and its component places.

The important distinction between these definitions lies in the emphasis on what makes the landscapes significant, and who determines the nature of that significance. Ethnographic landscapes are identified and delineated by members of the cultural groups who are traditionally associated with them, and whose histories and identities are tied to them. Further, ethnographic landscapes' significance derives from the roles they play in the associated communities' own traditional histories, not those criteria of national, state, or local significance that make them eligible for inclusion on the NRHP.

Thus, a fundamental difference between cultural and ethnographic landscapes as perceived in the NPS is whose history and cultural identity determines the significance of a given geographic space, and with whom the ability and authority to identify and describe it rests. These differences also suggest to us that ethnographic landscapes are not so much a category of cultural landscape as they are distinct types of landscapes that may overlap with or contain historic cultural landscapes.

In this regard, we also see ethnographic landscapes as fundamentally distinct from Traditional Cultural Properties (TCP) which are also places of cultural significance to American Indian and other ethnic groups but also rooted in the NRHP.

#### ***Traditional Cultural Properties and Ethnographic Landscapes***

With the 1989 NPS publication of National Register Bulletin 38, *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Properties*, federal land managers were provided with important guidance on the range of culturally significant resources and how such resources should be identified, documented, and evaluated in terms of their eligibility for inclusion on the NRHP. These procedures have been slowly but surely incorporated into federal cultural resources management activities for the last decade and have become the primary vehicle through which

managers have approached the protection of culturally-significant places.

In 1992, amendments to the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) codified the guidance provided in National Register Bulletin 38 and established requirements for identification of places of religious and cultural significance to American Indians along with other kinds of historic properties. While these requirements fostered cultural resources management documentation of culturally-significant places and coincided with a growing body of academic literature on "sacred geography," "spiritual geography," "sacred landscapes," and "culturally-significant places," the management approach to such places is generally in terms of "things" rather than geographic space.

The orientation to culturally-significant land and resources as "things" is largely a result of the NHPA being the primary vehicle through which such resources are identified. The NHPA requires identification of culturally-significant places as a category of potentially NRHP-eligible properties, along with other conventional kinds of properties such as buildings, archeological sites, and historic districts. Additionally, because the potential NRHP eligibility of historic properties is generally evaluated by cultural resources or historic preservation professionals, TCPs are often documented in terms of easily identifiable, bounded places that land managers can recognize as a kind of historic property. Whole landscapes often do not easily fit these property-oriented concepts. Large geographic expanses that may include culturally-significant components such as horizons, unmarked spiritual corridors, places of connection between the earth surface and the upper and lower realms, and the interrelationships among all these kinds of places are simply not well understood or easily identifiable by cultural resources managers. They are even less amenable to documentation and management within the NRHP framework. Nonetheless, the TCP model is often still used to try to accommodate a wide range of culturally-significant resources, including whole landscapes, because evaluation for the NRHP is an official model for determining significance of resources and thus implementing protection strategies.

But difficulties arise as a result of trying to define culturally-important landscapes only in terms of TCPs, which generally focus on bounded places that can be relatively easily docu-

mented, not on regional landscapes that can encompass significant amounts of land. Ethnographic landscapes also incorporate multiple components that derive their significance from the interrelationships among other cultural and natural resources such as plants, animals, minerals, landforms, and bodies of water that give the landscape meaning through their associations with a people's history and cultural identity. Additionally, a landscape that is culturally significant to one group may contain elements that are significant to other groups in other ways and are, therefore, within the overlapping boundaries of multiple culturally-significant landscapes. Further, individual components within an ethnographic landscape that are considered culturally significant may vary with periods of time and with sacred and secular contexts. It is difficult for resources managers to grasp the potentially complex and layered nature of ethnographic landscapes and even harder to define and document them within the NRHP framework that is generally used for specific sites, buildings, objects, or districts.

Despite these difficulties, we believe that identification, documentation, and culturally-informed management of ethnographic landscapes are very possible, beneficial to land managers and the groups of people whose identities derive from the landscapes, and not dependent on NRHP eligibility for implementing.

#### ***Are Ethnographic Landscapes Realistic?***

The only way to identify ethnographic landscapes is through the knowledge of the people who give them meaning in the first place. To meet this need, the NPS employs a variety of studies and community consultation efforts to incorporate the cultural knowledge of traditionally-associated peoples into its management activities. The Applied Ethnography program assists parks and NPS programs in conducting ethnographic assessments, cultural affiliation studies, traditional resource use studies, ethnographic resources inventories, and other research efforts designed to provide managers with a baseline of information about cultural values attached to park lands and resources. More than 160 such studies have been completed or are currently in progress Service wide. Once parks and other NPS programs have used these approaches to gain an understanding of which communities maintain traditional connections to park lands and

resources, park managers are in a position to develop ongoing relationships with traditionally-associated groups and routinely consult with them in park management planning efforts.

Through these efforts, many parks have been able to gain a great deal of understanding about the associations between the lands and resources under their stewardship and the traditionally-associated people to whom the resources hold deep cultural significance. Park managers have learned about ethnographic landscapes contained within park boundaries, and sometimes that entire parks are only small elements of much larger culturally-significant landscapes. Many have incorporated this knowledge into their long-range park management and interpretive plans, providing park visitors a quality experience while managing lands and resources to avoid cultural impacts to the people traditionally associated with them.

In a perfect world, there would be time and funding to conduct ethnographic research projects and community consultations during which cultural and ethnic groups all over the nation could identify the boundaries and elements of the landscapes within which their cultural identities are defined. One goal of such research would be to protect the identified landscapes to the extent necessary for all the associated groups to use the landscapes in ways that are needed to retain the groups' cultural integrity. However, in the bureaucratic world of land management, landscapes—whether cultural, ethnographic, or both—are usually identified, documented, and managed in response to some kind of land management action or need. That is why the National Historic Preservation Act was enacted in the first place, to ensure that federal agencies recognize their stewardship responsibilities to the historic places that collectively represent the story of the American people.

Section 110 of the NHPA directs agencies to proactively and comprehensively identify and inventory the historic properties and places they manage and to nominate them to the National Register of Historic Places. While some of the baseline ethnographic studies help meet this need, full implementation of this requirement is not often undertaken. Most of the time, efforts to consider the effects of agency activities occur at the level of individual projects or undertakings. Section 106 of the NHPA and its implementing regulations outline the process for identifying his-



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toric properties, including TCPs, as part of the planning for a specific project. The identification of TCPs may lead to the recognition of larger ethnographic landscapes of which individual TCPs are components, but the "Section 106 process" itself does not readily accommodate identification, documentation, and management planning for whole landscapes in the context of NRHP eligibility. However, recent changes to the regulations implementing Section 106 of the NHPA (36 CFR 800) do provide an avenue for documenting the larger landscapes of which TCPs may be a part.

While NHPA is specific to the consideration of effects to historic properties, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 requires federal agencies to consider impacts to the human environment, including historic properties and all the other kinds of natural and cultural resources that make up the environment within which people exist. Portions of the recent revisions to the Section 106 regulations (36 CFR 800.8) outline the possibilities for agencies to combine their identification efforts under NHPA and NEPA into one process. By using NEPA to also comply with NHPA to identify historic properties, agency land managers have identified NRHP-eligible TCPs and at the same time identified and documented the larger landscapes of which the TCPs are a part, even though the larger landscapes do not fit the NRHP eligibility criteria. This landscape approach to management of culturally-sensitive lands and resources has allowed managers in many cases to approach resources management needs more comprehen-

sively, placing individual sites and resources in culturally meaningful contexts, and giving managers more information about whole land areas rather than isolated places. Several parks have begun taking such approaches in the development of their General Management Plans/Environmental Impact Statements. Through the use of these flexible approaches, looking beyond NRHP boundaries, and communication, the identification, documentation, and management of ethnographic landscapes are becoming increasingly useful tools for the NPS, other land managers, and the cultural groups who give rich cultural meaning to the lands and resources under federal stewardship.

#### Note

\* For landscapes as symbolic environments, see Thomas Greider and Lorraine Garkovich, "Landscapes: The Social Construction of Nature and the Environment," *Rural Sociology* 59:1(1994): 1-24.

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